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U.S. May Help 2 Rebel Groups Of Cambodians

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WASHINGTON, April 9 — The Reagan Administration, in a policy shift, said today that it would no longer rule out supplying United States military assistance to the two non-Communist Cambodian guerrilla groups.

The new policy, which is expected to be discussed by Secretary of State George P. Shultz with leaders of the groups on Wednesday, marks a departure from the Administration's hands-off military policy toward Indochina. But State Department officials said the United States still believed primary aid for the insurgents should come from others.

Previous Appeals Rejected

Since President Reagan took office in 1981, the Administration has repeatedly rejected appeals from Son Sann and Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the leaders of the two non-Communist guerrilla groups, for military aid.

But last Wednesday, the House Foreign Affairs Committee, by a vote of 24 to 9, approved a \$5 million authorization to the two groups, as part of the overall \$14.5 billion foreign-aid bill for the 1986 fiscal year. The money would be funneled to the Cambodian groups by Thailand. The bill still has to pass the full House and Senate and have a matching appropriations grant.

In response to what Administration officials called a new mood in Congress in favor of military aid to the non-Communist insurgents, and its own declared policy of aid to insurgents in Nicaragua and Afghanistan, the Administration altered its policy.

A State Department official, in an authorized statement, said today that although the Administration felt the Cambodian insurgents now had sufficient arms, "we do not think it is wise to forgo having flexibility on this point should circumstances change."

"We are not ruling military aid out, if it would be the difference in enabling the resistance to sustain itself," another State Department official said. "But there is no indication that we are close to that point now."

William J. Casey, director of Central Intelligence, has said he would support the military aid, and Mr. Shultz has reportedly not objected to it.

There are three Cambodian groups in opposition to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and to the Government in Phnom Penh set up by the Vietnamese after their invasion in 1978.

The most prominent and best trained is the Khmer Rouge, led by the former Communist leader of Cambodia, Pol Pot. Mr. Pol Pot has been accused of being responsible for the deaths of more than two million Cambodians from 1975, when his group seized power from the American-backed Lon Nol Government, until the Khmer Rouge were forced into guerrilla warfare in

1978. The Khmer Rouge, said to number 35,000 men, receives its military aid from China.

The second-largest group is the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, led by Mr. Son Sann, which has 17,000 guerrillas. The third, led by the former Cambodian chief of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, is the Nationalist Army, which has 8,000 rebel soldiers.

The Son Sann and Sihanouk groups have both received aid from China, Thailand and Singapore, but less than that given the Khmer Rouge. American officials said the amount of aid given the non-Communists had recently increased.

All three groups have been dealt serious military blows by Vietnamese forces in the recent offensive near the Thailand border. Now, they are regrouping, receiving new training and appealing, by themselves and through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, for military and economic help. The members of Asean are Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei.

Mr. Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk's son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, arrived in Washington on Monday and held talks at the State Department today before the meeting with Mr. Shultz on Wednesday.

The Administration had previously opposed giving military aid to the Son Sann and Sihanouk forces on several grounds, State Department officials said.

One was a belief that neither of those groups was able to fight well and, if given arms, would likely be destroyed by the Vietnamese.

Another factor, officials said, was that the Asean nations were taking the lead in Indochina and that it would be wrong for the United States to become directly involved in military aid, since it could weaken support for the Cambodian resistance in third-world countries and make it into a Vietnamese-American issue, rather than a Vietnamese-Asean one.

A third factor, officials said, was that Congress was deemed unlikely to want to resume military aid to Indochina, given the refusal of Congress to provide additional aid to the American-backed Vietnamese and Cambodians in 1975, which hastened their fall to Communists.

The aid has been opposed by Representative Sam Gejdenson, Democrat of Connecticut, who said he feared it would reintroduce the United States into a conflict in Indochina, and by Representative Jim Leach, Republican of Iowa, who said, "I personally believe that there is no stomach in this country for a renewed military involvement in Indochina, and what we may have here is a Democratically propelled resort to force."